

# Tracy Kidder Biography

Source: *Contemporary Authors Online*, Detroit Gale 2009.  
Literature Resource Center.



Tracy Kidder was born November 12, 1945, in New York, NY, the son of Henry Maynard (a lawyer) and Reine Tracy (high school teacher) Kidder. He married Frances T. Toland, January 2, 1971. They have two children—a boy and a girl.

Kidder earned an A.B. at Harvard University in 1967 and his M.F.A. at the University of Iowa in 1974. He has written/published since 1974, and been a contributing editor of the *Atlantic Monthly* since 1982.

Kidder's many literary awards include Atlantic First Award, *Atlantic Monthly*, for a short story "The Death of Major Great"; Sidney Hillman Foundation Prize, 1978, for article, "Soldiers of Misfortune"; Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award, 1982, both for *The Soul of a New Machine*; National Book Critics Circle nomination (nonfiction), 1986, for *House*; Christopher Award and National Book Critics Circle Award nomination (nonfiction), 1989, Robert F. Kennedy Award and Ambassador Book Award, 1990, all for *Among Schoolchildren*; New England Book Award, 1994, for *Old Friends*.

In his best-known books, Tracy Kidder has shown himself to be adept at creating works of nonfiction that, as he told Amanda Smith of *Publisher's Weekly*, "do a lot of the things that novels do." By using similar research and writing techniques for all of his works, Kidder has discovered a formula for success, yet his books are far from formulaic.

Critics have complimented Kidder's ability to transform the ordinary and everyday into something fascinating. As informative and entertaining as those journeys may be, the focus of Kidder's energy is on the people who inhabit his books. He revealed to Smith that one of his purposes is "to bring people to life on the page." Readers and reviewers agree with Phyllis Theroux, *The New York Times*, who proclaimed Kidder's works "full of the author's genuine love, delight and celebration of the human condition."

# Book Summary

Source: [www.Litlovers.com](http://www.Litlovers.com)

Tracy Kidder, winner of the Pulitzer Prize and author of the bestsellers *The Soul of a New Machine*, *House*, and the enduring classic *Mountains Beyond Mountains*, has been described by the *Baltimore Sun* as the "master of the non-fiction narrative." In *Strength in What Remains*, Kidder gives us a wonderfully written, inspiring account of one man's remarkable American journey and of the ordinary people who helped him—a brilliant testament to the power of will and of second chances.

Deo arrives in America from Burundi in search of a new life. Having survived a civil war and genocide, plagued by horrific dreams, he lands at JFK airport with two hundred dollars, no English, and no contacts. He ekes out a precarious existence delivering groceries, living in Central Park, and learning English by reading dictionaries in bookstores. Then Deo begins to meet the strangers who will change his life, pointing him eventually in the direction of Columbia University, medical school, and a life devoted to healing.

## Discussion Questions

Source: [www.LitLovers.com](http://www.LitLovers.com)

1. The first section of the book entitled "Flights" describes two kinds of flights: those in Africa, which are obvious flights for physical survival; and those in New York City. What kind of "flights" does the New York part of the book refer to?
2. How does Deo derive his name? What is the irony in his name...or is there irony? What are the meanings of some of the other names of those he meets along his journey?
3. How does Deo think about his experiences in New York City as compared to his growing-up years in Burundi? Does he change his views over time?
4. The manager of the food store where Deo works humiliates him. Why does this treatment sting more than the other humiliations he has received before?
5. What does Deo feel about Sharon McKenna and her personal quest for his redemption? How do you feel about her? Why is McKenna so insistent?

6. Consider this passage in Chapter 8 from the W.E.B. Dubois poem, “The Souls of Black Folk”: “To be a poor man is hard, but to be a poor race in a land of dollars is the very bottom of hardships.” How does this reflect Deo’s life in New York?

7. Kidder conducts numerous interviews about Deo— Drs. Joia Mukherjee and Paul Farmer, Sharon McKenna, Charlie and Nancy Wolff. What are their various interpretations of Deo? Do you agree or not with any (or all?) of their assessments?

8. How does Deo’s involvement in Partners in Health open up a new world for him?

9. What is Deo’s reason for refusing psychiatric treatment? Do you agree with his decision and reasoning? Could he benefit from therapy?

10. Upon hearing Deo’s account of his life, Kidder admits that he himself would not have survived. What qualities does Deo possess that enabled his survival? How do you think you might have fared under the same circumstances?

11. How and why does Kidder’s relationship with Deo change during his trip with Deo to Burundi?

12. Describe Deo’s reaction upon visiting the Muhato hospital. What is the significance of the left open door? How does the hospital visit compare to Deo’s visit to the Murambi memorial?

13. Talk about Deo’s belief that the primary cause of genocide is misery. Do you agree with his observation?

14. Deo laughs while recounting the suicide of a Belgian colonial. He also laughed earlier, in Chapter 9, while hiding among the corpses. Talk about this strange reaction and what it suggests about Deo’s state of mind, personality or the culture in which he grew up.

15. In the epilogue, Deo talks about the Burundian volunteers who are building a road to his clinic. Why are they so committed to bringing Deo’s dream to fruition.

16. Has this book changed your understanding of genocide? What other books or films have focused on this problem? Do you see genocide as a localized problem or a global issue?

17. If you’ve read Kidder’s *Mountains Beyond Mountains*, discuss the two men at the heart of both books: in what ways are they similar? Did *Mountains* affect your reading of this work?

# Book club in a Bag

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## ***Strength in What Remains*** by Tracy Kidder

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